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Casey Squares Off Against the Press

Leaks Vs. Public Service Announcements

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WASHINGTON

RONALD REAGAN, Caspar W. Weinberger and William J. Casey share a profound distaste for leaks to the press. But, as demonstrated once again last week, the President, the Secretary of Defense, and the Director of Central Intelligence have been inconsistent in their approach.

For instance, John P. Wallach of the Hearst News Service got a tip several weeks ago from a colleague in London and put in calls to the State Department, the Pentagon and the White House. His question: Had Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher refused to allow the United States to launch bombers from bases in Britain to strike Libya. The first two officials with whom he spoke said they were under a "tight lid." The third said the tip was wrong, adding, "the President has decided to act." That aide declined to deny a suggestion that Air Force F-111's would be dispatched, thus confirming it. A fourth official filled in a few details.

Thus on Saturday, April 12, nearly 72 hours before the attack against Libya, Mr. Wallach's story on the front page of The Baltimore News American quoted "a senior Administration source" as saying the British had given permission for the F-111 strike. No protest was made over the surreptitious disclosure of sensitive military information, nor did the Administration start a search for the leakers.

But when The Washington Post and a nationally syndicated column by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak carried reports that Mr. Casey had gone to Angola to arrange for the covert shipment through Zaire of antiaircraft missiles to insurgents, the response was different. The suspected leaker was Michael E. Pillsbury, an Assistant Under Secretary of Defense. Asked to take a polygraph, or lie detector, test, which he failed, he was promptly dismissed and may face legal action.

What made the difference?

The first leak was authorized, since putting out the information conformed with Administration policy. During the week before the attack on Libya, the Administration was trying to keep that country's leader, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, off balance with public and private warnings that the attack was coming. The leak ascribed to Mr. Pillsbury, on the other hand, was unauthorized. Especially damaging, in the Administration view, was the mention of Zaire, the government of which has been nervous about being linked to the Angolan rebels led by Jonas Savimbi, who has been criticized in Africa because he has received support from South Africa.

Last week, the prospective publication of information that Administration officials said included classified data on American intelligence provided to the Soviet Union by Ronald W. Pelton, a former employee of the National Security Agency who has been charged with espionage, brought Mr. Casey out.

Frustrated over the Administration's inability to control its own officials, he threatened to take five news organizations, including The New York Times, to court for publishing unauthorized information. The Washington Post reported that during a meeting with the newspaper's editors Mr. Casey asserted, "we've got five absolutely cold violations." Noting that The Post was planning to publish new information about intelligence activities, Mr. Casey was quoted as saying: "I'm not threatening you. But you've got to know that if you publish this, I would recommend that you be prosecuted."

The evidence in such a prosecution would be interesting. For Reagan Administration officials, like their predecessors, have been primary sources of leaks. As the chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence, Senator Dave Durenberger, Republican of Minnesota, put it recently: "Every Administration has faced the problem of leaks, but none so much as this one."

Stephen Hess of the Brookings Institution, in a study of Washington news coverage, has categorized leaks by motive. The policy leak, he says, "is a straightforward pitch for or against a proposal using some document or insiders' information." The trial balloon leak reveals a proposal "to assess its assets and liabilities."

Ego leaks, which in Mr. Hess's view are frequent, provide information "primarily to satisfy a sense of self-importance." Goodwill leaks, he says, are designed "to accummulate credit with a reporter." In the animus leak, Mr. Hess says, "information is disclosed to embarass another person." With the whistleblower leak, "going to the press may be the last resort of frustrated civil servants who feel they cannot correct a perceived wrong through regular Government channels."

The Justice Department is said to be resisting Mr. Casey's suggestion that news organizations be prosecuted. Larry Speakes, the White House spokesman, said it would be the Justice Department's decision. On Capitol Hill, the vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Senator Patrick J. Leahy, Democrat of Vermont, said: "I think when you go after press organizations, you're treating the symptom rather than the problem. You should go after the persons doing the leaking."

"Anyone who violates the law should be prosecuted," Mr. Speakes said at week's end, "whether it be a publication or whether it be a member of the Administration who is leaking information."

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